

IDENT RECORD

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ADDER'S ALLEY

Let's take action to make sure there are no more Libbys

BY TRACY VELAZQUEZ

On Feb. 11, a U.S. Senate hearing was held to discuss health impacts from toxic, asbestos-laden dust that spread when the World Trade Center collapsed. Those who worked or lived nearby called for the government to create a registry of those in the area, monitor their health, and pay for medical costs they might incur in the future. And they expressed fear about their children's exposure and illnesses that might manifest themselves for years.

Does this sound familiar? It should. Libby, Montana is dealing with many of these same issues because of asbestos from the vermiculite mine there; hundreds have already died because of asbestos-related diseases, and many more are affected. But unlike those in New York who can point to foreign terrorists as the villains, the people of Libby have only the American system to blame. And so far, the American system has no answer to the question of who will pay for health care in Libby.

Most of those involved in Libby see W.R. Grace, the owner and operator of the mine, as primarily responsible. Evidence points to Grace not acting when the true risks of asbestos exposure became known. Currently, Grace has a medical plan that pays for most asbestos-related screening and care. However, Grace is in bankruptcy, and has made no commitment to continue the plan in the future. An EPA fine on Grace of \$2.75 million will go toward health care, but is only estimated to last two to three years if the Grace plan goes away.

Many feel that state and federal agencies bear some responsibility. An EPA internal audit revealed the agency knew of health problems at the Grace mine in the early 1980's, and state environmental and health agencies may have sidelined Libby problems as well. Thanks to the support of Governor Martz and Montana's congressional delegation, the EPA has designated Libby a top priority Superfund site. However, the Superfund cannot pay for medical care. And while the state of Montana is working with the Feds to screen and track individuals, but there are currently no provisions for treatment.

So if Grace ends their medical plan, where will the money come from for treatment and long-term care, in a community where almost half the population is uninsured or uninsured?

In her "state of the state" address in January, Governor Martz promised "to ensure that the short and long-term health care needs of the citizens of Libby are fully met." She is taking a first step by

meeting with Libby community members, state officials, and others on March 27 to begin to develop a strategy. Certainly, state funds are limited; no one expects Governor Martz to squeeze a Libby Insurance Plan out of the state budget. However, there are a number of important actions that she can take, most of which involve her leadership more than the state's coffers:

- Lead a push for a federal "white lung" program to pay asbestos-related disease costs, similar to the "black lung" program that exists for coal miners.

- Designate a state taskforce for Libby who would ensure existing government healthcare programs are being coordinated and used to their fullest.

- Direct tobacco settlement money toward Libby. Asbestos-related health problems are worsened by smoking; cessation services, prevention, education, and incentives for businesses to go smoke-free would be a tremendous benefit.

- Create a statewide education program on the dangers of asbestos exposure at home and at work to reduce health impacts throughout Montana. Libby residents don't want to see others go through what they themselves have suffered.

- Work with the attorney general's office to investigate possible legal avenues for securing health care funding from responsible parties.

On a national level, we must question why corporations continue to escape the consequences of their actions. These are not terrorists hiding in caves; they are big businesses whose numbers are in the phonebook. Our Superfund account has shrunk from \$3.8 billion in 1996 to \$78 million, because in 1995 Congress eliminated the corporate tax that funded it. This means that you and I will pay for Superfund cleanups. And with no "superfund" for health care, there has never been a way to get businesses to pay "upfront" for medical expenses caused by their negligence.

We need to make sure that the health care needs of the people of Libby are met. But we also need to make sure there are "no more Libbys." The current situation with Grace shows not only that you can always trust businesses to do the right thing, but you can always hold them accountable afterwards if they don't. No community should ever again have to face what Libby has had to endure – particularly when it was not at the hands of terrorists, but because of the misdeeds and mistakes of their fellow Americans.

TRACY VELAZQUEZ is president of Commonwealth Consulting, a public interest/nonprofit consulting firm in Bozeman. She is working on health care funding issues for Lincoln County.

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